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The need to bring the voices of pornography consumers into public debates about the genre and its effects

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Abstract

In public debates about the effects of pornography on individual consumers, and on society more generally, the main voices heard are those of church leaders, politicians, and opinion columnists. In these debates it is rare to hear the insights of those people who regularly consume pornography. This article analyses the major traditions of academic research into pornography and points out that academic work also systematically excludes the voices of these consumers. It argues that there is no justification for this position and describes a recent study that attempted to recognise the expertise of pornography consumers. The paper concludes with an example of how such a perspective could contribute to public debates by showing what consumers of pornography have to say about the effects of pornography on them, and on other people.

The need to bring the voices of pornography consumers into public debates about the genre and its effects

Introduction and literature review

Consumers of pornography are the objects of much controversy in the Australian media. We see ongoing debates about the kinds of people who consume pornography, and the effects it has on their attitudes towards relationships, violence, and crime. There has been concern that pornography can 'damage' people (Hamilton, quoted in Symons, 2004, p. 4)—particularly young people. Commentators worry that pornography: 'plays on the confusion and ultimate emotional sterility of those who use it' (Shanahan, 2004, p. 13). There is an ongoing concern that 'exposure to pornography' can turn people into sex offenders (Fewster, 2004: 17), including paedophiles and gang rapists (Hamilton, 2004: 11). There are also concerns that it can create unrealistic expectations of sex, and put people off the reality of sexual relationships (Hamilton, 2004, p. 11); indeed, that '[n]o man who regularly uses pornography can have a healthy sexual relationship with a woman' (Hamilton, quoted in Symons, 2004, p. 4). Other commentators argue that pornography contributes to a general increase in violent crime in our society (Pell, 2004, p. 83); and that it is addictive and is turning people into 'junkies' (Lust junkies, 2004, p. 68).

The types of voices most commonly heard in these public debates are those of opinion columnists, politicians, church leaders, and academic researchers. Surprisingly, the voices of pornography consumers themselves are rarely published. Indeed, the only consumers of pornography who are regularly heard to speak in public are those who name themselves as 'addicts' and are seeking to stop watching the genre (see for example 'Logging on, 2004; Taylor, 2005).

This tendency is reflected in academic research. Consumers of pornography are most commonly constructed as subjects in the sense of being subjected to experiments and rarely presented as subjects in the sense of being thinking agents who could offer an insight into the reasons for consuming pornography and the effects it could have on them. Most academic research into the consumers of pornography has been interested to find out whether the consumption of pornography has unconscious effects on tendencies towards asocial behaviour (in research conducted before the 1980s) and tendencies towards aggressive behaviour towards women (in later work). Because of this focus of interest, the research has tended to be uninterested in the conscious processes of thinking about pornography on the part of consumers.

There are three main traditions of academic research into pornography's consumers: sex offender studies, aggregate studies, and laboratory experiments.

In sex offender studies, researchers interview subjects who have committed sex crimes—including, though not always limited to, rape—and find out about their exposure to pornographic materials (see Abel, 1983; Abel, Becker & Mittleman, 1985; Gebhard, Gagnon, Pomeroy & Christensen, 1965; Goldstein, 1973, p. 218; Goldstein & Kant, 1973; Johnson, Kupperstein & Peters, cited in Donnerstein, Linz and Penrod, 1987, p. 34; Walker, cited in Donnerstein et al., 1987, p. 34). In this, the consumers of pornography are indeed taken to be a valuable source of information, but they are interviewed primarily as sex offenders and not as typical consumers of

the genre. It is generally agreed that these studies have demonstrated that rapists tend to use less pornography—either violent, or non-violent—than control groups, and that, on average, they come from more sexually repressed backgrounds and are exposed to pornography at a later age.

In aggregate studies, researchers compare the availability or consumption of pornographic material in a society with reported levels of sex crimes—particularly rape—attempting to find correlations. This work has produced no clear data and is highly contested. Some aggregate studies show that in societies where pornographic material—either violent or non-violent—is more readily available, rates of reported rape drop, or at least rise less quickly than other forms of crime (see Abramson & Hayashi, 1984; Gentry, 1991; Kimmel & Linders, 1996; Kutchinsky, 1991, pp. 51, 58). Other studies show that there is a correlation between availability of pornography and rape rates (Baron & Straus, 1989; Scott & Schwalm, 1988). The usefulness of these studies is limited because, although they assume that the people consuming pornography are the same people as those committing sex crimes, this assumption is not investigated, no evidence is given to substantiate it, and no mechanism is proposed whereby the individual consumer of pornography is transformed into a sex criminal. The individual consumer of the genre does not have a place in such research (Davies, 1997, p. 4).

In experimental studies, researchers expose subjects in the laboratory to (usually violent) pornography and then measure changes in their aggressiveness and attitudes towards women. The results of this research are also contradictory. There is general consensus that viewing non-violent pornography does not produce any significant effects. In terms of violent pornography, the results are more confusing. Some researchers have managed to produce significant negative effects in consumers from viewing violent pornography in laboratory experiments. These include increased tendencies to aggression against women (Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981); an increased acceptance of violence against women in general (Malamuth & Check, 1981) and rape in particular (Zillmann & Bryant, 1982, 1984); an acceptance of rape myths (Malamuth & Check, 1981); the production of rape fantasies (Malamuth, 1981); an increase in self-nominated likelihood to commit rape (Check, 1985; Malamuth, 1981); and decreased support for women's rights (Zillmann & Bryant, 1984, p. 134). However, other researchers have been unable to replicate these results (Barak & Fisher, 1997; Baron & Bell, 1973; Fisher & Grenier, 1994; Linz, Donnerstein & Penrod, 1988; Malamuth & Centi, 1986; Padgett, Brislin-Slutz & Neal, 1989; and discussion in Fisher & Barak, 1989, p. 302; Donnerstein et al., 1987, pp. 52, 72; Fischer & Barak, 1991; Fisher & Grenier, 1994, p. 23; Linz, 1989). Even if we accept that in some laboratory studies there is a link between the consumption of violent pornography and negative attitudes, how do we reconcile this data with the absolute refusal of such a correlation in sex offender studies (Fisher & Grenier, 1994, p. 25)? For the purposes of this research, a key element of laboratory experiments into pornography is that they do not recruit samples who use pornography in their everyday life. Rather, they tend to recruit college students, many of whom are not consumers of pornography. These cohorts are then shown material that many find upsetting or distasteful (violent pornography), in public settings where they are not allowed to masturbate, as most consumers of pornography do while consuming the genre (Potter, 1996, p. 111). In short, we can say that laboratory experiments tell us little about consumers of pornography: they rather tell us about the effects of being exposed involuntarily to pornography in unfamiliar, non-sexual surroundings. Such

studies show little interest in the conscious ways in which people who regularly use pornography make sense of its place in their lives. Indeed, not only do we not hear subject's voices in these statistical analyses, but subjects are—as is common in psychological testing—deliberately misled as to the purpose of the experiments so that they do not know that their attitudes towards pornography are of interest (see, for example, Donnerstein & Berkowitz, 1981).

These are three main genres of academic research into the consumers of pornography; however, an emerging fourth genre attempts to address these issues by studying the effects of pornography on its users within natural environments. Some researchers now use surveys of self-nominated pornography users in order to understand how the genre functions in everyday life (Davies, 1997; Padgett, Brislin-Slutz, & Neal, 1989; Potter, 1996; Richters, Grulich, de Visser, Smith, & Rissel, 2003, p. 186). There have been several calls for more empirical work in this area (Davies, 1997, p. 16; Lawrence & Herold, 1988, p. 168; Potter, 1996, p. 77; Smith, 2002, p. 1). Most of the work has been quantitative; however, two qualitative studies stand out for presenting the voices of consumers of pornography.

One of the few pieces of academic writing is Clarissa Smith's account of interviews with sixteen female consumers of the British pornographic magazine *For Women* (2002). Here she notes that 'the motivations of porn readers are rarely examined' (p. 1), and that theorists have tended to imagine that ordinary consumers of pornography are unable to have any response beyond sexual excitement: 'Only academic, radical feminist or moralist viewers seem able to experience responses other than the "purely"sexual: *they* can talk of their boredom. "Ordinary" porn users are never disappointed, embarrassed, put off, worried, or appalled' (p. 6; see also Nagel, 2002, p. 1). In fact, she found from speaking to the sixteen consumers, responses to pornography were highly differentiated, and these women consumed the pornography for a variety of reasons. She gives the example of one reader whose husband wasn't interested in her sexually. This woman says that the effect of her use of sexually explicit materials was that: 'it gave me strength … I didn't feel like my husband was the norm, thank god … there were blokes out there that did enjoy making love' (Smith, 2002, p. 9).

Smith's work points us in the direction of research that can listen to the voices of pornography consumers in order to allow them to articulate their thinking about the genre and its place in their lives, but it is a small scale study. Perhaps the most important piece of research in this area is not an academic publication, but a book by journalist David Loftus. In *Watching Sex* (2002), he reports on interviews with over one hundred and forty male consumers of pornography. His findings are surprising when compared with the data generated within social science research. These male pornography consumers

> would like to see more plot and romance in pornography … they do not particularly enjoy close ups of genitals … they not only do NOT find violence against women or domination of women sexy, they are specifically turned off by such behaviour on the rare occasions they see it in pornography, and most haven't even seen any … they have not sought ever more vivid, kinky and violent pornography, but have either stuck with what they liked from the first, investigated wilder content and returned to what they preferred, or lost interest altogether … they don't like the way men are portrayed in pornography … [and] they are against making it available to children, even though many of them were exposed to pornographic stories and images before the age of 12 and don't feel the worse for it (Loftus, 2002, p. xii)

With all these points, he emphasises that: 'I talked to men for whom some of the above is not true. I talked to others for whom none or all of it is true' (p. xii). But they were common discourses employed by the men he interviewed.

These studies are important for pointing us towards the possibility that we can bring the perspective of pornography consumers into public debates about the genre and its effects. However, little such work has been done in Australia. For this reason, we decided to interview in detail a range of Australian consumers of pornography about their attitudes towards and experience with the genre, and their thinking about its place in our society. This paper presents the results of these interviews[1].

Method

Sample

This data-gathering was part of a larger three-year project entitled 'Understanding Pornography in Australia', financed by the Australian Research Council.

We focused on three main aspects of pornography in this larger project. Firstly, we examined the production of pornography in Australia—what kinds of people were making it, why, and how much they were making (see Albury, 2005). Secondly, we looked at the content of mainstream pornography, analysing the content of fifty of the best-selling pornographic videos in Australia (McKee, in press). Thirdly, we wanted to provide data about the consumers of pornography in Australia. To this end we employed the largest survey of consumers of pornography ever conducted in Australia (over one thousand consumers). This provided valuable quantitative data. However, recognising the limits of such statistical information, we also wanted to get more of a sense of how these consumers of pornography thought about their own practice of consumption of the genre, and its effects on them. We were interested in seeing what 'available discourses' (Muecke, 1982) —ways of thinking about pornography—were employed by these Australian consumers.

To this end, we asked the people who replied to the anonymous survey if they would be willing to do a follow up interview, and to provide their contact details if this was the case. 329 respondents (32.2% of the 1023 respondents) answered in the affirmative, and provided their contact details. From this sample we chose fifty respondents to be interviewed. In choosing the interviewees, we aimed not for a *representative* sample; but for an *illustrative* one. We wanted to ensure that the widest possible range of voices was heard and so identified respondents from a range of demographic groups. The factors we paid attention to were those that previous work in the area had identified as having a relevance to the consumption of, and attitudes towards, sexual issues: gender; geographical location (including state/territory and urban/rural); age; level of formal education; and sexuality (see Smith, Rissel, Richters, Grulich, & de Visser, 2003, p. 103). Due to practical issues (principally related to changes in funding for the project and the timeline involved), it was possible to interview only 46 consumers. Forty of the interviews were with individuals. Three were with couples where both partners consumed pornography. The sample broke down into the following categories:

Gender

Male	26

Female	20

Age

Under 18	2
19-25	8
26-35	14
36-45	11
46-55	5
46-65	2
66+	4

State/Territory

Vic	14
NSW	11
Tas	4
WA	3
Qld	7
NT	1
SA	4
ACT	2

Sexuality

Straight	26
Gay/Lesbian	5
Bisexual	9
BDSM	5
Celibate	1

Geographical location

Urban	10
Suburban	26
Town	2
Small town	1
Rural	6

Remote	1

Level of formal education

Secondary	11
Tertiary	22
Postgraduate	7
Still studying	6

We didn't specifically weight respondents based on their voting preferences, but, given the political positioning of debates about pornography in Australia (with the Liberal-National coalition generally favouring stronger censorship and Labor generally favouring less government intervention), it may be of interest to readers to see the breakdown of interviewees by voting practice.

Labor	14
Liberal-National	11
Greens	9
Democrat	6
Other (including issue-based voting, not registered, and too young to vote)	6

Appendix 2 provides demographic details for each of the interviewees; this can be cross-referenced with the numbers given in the body of this article.

It must be borne in mind that the consumers interviewed in this article, by definition, are those who are happy to discuss their pornographic consumption with a researcher. Those consumers who would be unwilling to discuss this issue are not included. However, we must not assume that this makes the sample unrepresentatively positive in their attitudes towards pornography: it is commonly consumers who are unhappy with the media who tend to make their voices heard (phone calls to television stations, and public lobbying about the media, tend overwhelmingly to be negative).

Interviewers

A team of researchers was recruited around the country to interview these consumers, relying on recommendations from colleagues in each geographical area. We made it clear we were looking for researchers with interview skills, and preferably with some knowledge of, or interest in, the cultural politics of sexual representation. Male interviewers were recruited to speak with male subjects, female interviewers to speak to female subjects.

Fifteen interviewers were recruited around the country. Female interviewers were recruited for Queensland, Victoria (two), New South Wales, Tasmania, and Western Australia. There were no female interviewees in the Northern Territory or the Australian Capital Territory; the female interviewee in South Australia was part of a couple interviewed by a male researcher. Male interviewers were recruited in all States and Territories, with two in Sydney. Interviewers attended a meeting with the interviewees at a place of the interviewee's choosing. Most interviews lasted about an hour.

Development of measures

Very little interview work with consumers of pornography has been previously conducted, and what has been done has not followed strict social science protocols (see Loftus, 2202; Smith, 2002). Therefore it was not possible to draw on established interview instruments. The questions were developed specifically for this project (see Appendix 1).

The aim of the research was to provide data from a new perspective for academic and public debates about pornography. A survey of previous academic writing suggested the key issue of concern was the effects of viewing pornography on consumers, with particular attention to violent arousal and attitudes towards women (see Donnerstein, Linz, & Penrod, 1987).

Surveying public debates, key issues were, again, the effect of viewing pornography on consumers (see Symons, 2004); the effects of pornography viewing on children (see Hamilton, 2004); distinctions between good and bad pornography (see Loane, 2004); the question of pornography addiction (see Lust junkies, 2004); the issue of whether pornography destroys relationships (see Ranzten, 2004); and the issue of censorship (see Hamilton, 2004).

The questions were then developed in an attempt to allow consumers to address these issues. We attempted to present the questions in vernacular language, avoiding explicitly academic or condemnatory language that would have lead interviewees to respond with particular positions (see McKee, 2004: 205).

Interviews were semi-structured. Researchers were encouraged to allow flexibility in the interviews, allowing the interviewees to set agenda points during the discussion if they showed an interest in doing so. The point of this research was to find out what pornography consumers thought about the genre: what issues were important to them and how they articulated them. In this context, it was important not to impose a rigid interview schedule that may have led them to discuss issues that did not seem particularly important to them.

Analysis of data

Interviews were then transcribed and subjected to the methodology of 'interview textual analysis' (McKee, 2004):

> I did not take a naïve realist approach to this data. I did not attempt to measure the 'authenticity' or 'truth' of the speaking positions. On the other hand, I did not want to look for hidden deep meanings of which the interviewees themselves would be unaware. Rather, I treated the interview data as a text to be subjected to poststructural

> textual analysis, making an 'educated guess at some of the most likely interpretations that might be made of that text' (McKee, 2004: 204-205).

The purpose of the analysis was to find out which issues concerned the consumers, and what they had to say about them. In doing this, I employed two approaches within the broader methodology of textual analysis. The first was a more anthropological approach – mapping out the most common forms of responses within the broad discourses that framed them (such as the libertarian anti-censorship position). In this, I aimed for representativeness of interviewees' comments. The second was an exegetical approach, where I noticed the most intelligent and interesting points made by interviewees and discussed these.

Some questions that had seemed of importance when the project was designed actually elicited little response from consumers. The issues did not seem to interest them. They had little to say about them, and did not appear to have thought about them before the interview. For example, in responding to the issue of whether they would like to see Australian-produced pornography, few respondents had a strong position, most making comments such as: 'I don't think it would matter one way or the other' (44). Those who did take a position, either for or against, tended to use non-committal terminology such as: 'sure' (42). I have excluded these issues from the analysis, on the basis that the interviewees did not demonstrate that they were part of their everyday thinking about pornography in a natural setting.

Other issues did concern them; they had obviously thought about them before the interview, in the course of their everyday lives. The responses to these issues can be divided into two categories.

Firstly, there were those issues of public policy about which interviewees were able to give clear answers without hesitation, usually within a limited number of quite clearly defined discursive frameworks. On the issue of whether pornography should be censored, for example, or what constitutes offensive pornography, most interviewees were able to articulate answers clearly and promptly, suggesting that these were issues on which they did have positions before they were asked to think about them by interviewers. In relation to these questions, I have mapped out the most common answers, grouping them into discursive areas (for example, in relation to offensive pornography, there was a clear discourse of consent, and a clear anti-paedophiliac discourse).

Secondly, there were those issues where the interviewees seemed to be genuinely interested and enthusiastic in answering the questions. They talked at greater length, offered more examples, and seemed to be more engaged in the issues. Issues in this category include the question of what constitutes good pornography, and their first experiences of pornography.

It is important to acknowledge that some researchers have questioned the validity of information provided by consumers of pornography. For example, reviewing a chapter based on this research, Michael Gilding described the data as unreliable: 'just because a self-selecting group of pornography consumers say that pornography is good for their mental health and marriages does not make it so' (Gilding, 2004: np).

In one sense, such criticisms are irrelevant. The point of this study is to introduce a new set of voices into the public debate about pornography—the voices of those who consume pornography. It is to show how these people make sense of their own use of the genre, how they talk about it, and how they understand it. To measure these voices

against a supposedly objective reality determined by experiments that treat them as unable to know themselves would be to misunderstand the point of the project. We already know a lot about what psychologists think about pornography use, what we don't know is how the consumers of the genre think about it. In this sense, the most important point of this project is to find out whether users of pornography are intellectually competent individuals who are able to articulate their thinking in response to questions that are put to them. As the data below will show, I am satisfied that this hypothesis at least has been proven by the research.

On a second level, although it is impossible to prove the extent to which the answers given match the actual everyday practice of these people, we would ask: is there any reason to presuppose that consumers of pornography as a group are inherently any less able to articulate self-awareness, or any less trustworthy, than any other group in society? Social science commonly uses self-reporting as a means of data-gathering. This causes no problems so long as the limitations of the methodology are borne in mind—as is the case with all methodologies. It seems that some critics of pornography believe that users of pornography must necessarily be less trustworthy and more prone to misreporting than other groups (see Hamilton in Symons, 2004, whose comments clearly dismiss the voices of pornography users who think that they do have healthy relationships). As far as I know, no research has been done to support such a contention. In short, we should treat the data presented in this article in the same way that we would treat any other interview data.

Results and discussion

Due to the dictates of space it is not possible to survey all of the major issues discussed by interviewees in this article (see McKee, forthcoming, for a more detailed discussion of a number of issues). In order to illustrate the potential that this approach has for contributing to public debate, I report here on the ways in which consumers of pornography discussed one key issue that is often raised in the media – the effects of pornography on those who use it.

We didn't ask an individual question about these effects; these comments arose in relation to a number of questions such as: 'Tell me about the first time you saw something pornographic?' and 'Do you think that pornography is a problem in our society?'. This suggests that it is an issue about which the interviewees were concerned, and about which they had already thought.

The most striking fact about the ways that pornography consumers imagined pornography having effects on its consumers was the sheer variety of responses. The fact that consumers didn't agree on a common effect—even to argue with the idea—raises the possibility that pornography may be used in a myriad of ways, and may interact with consumers lives in many different, and unexpected, ways.

There exist two contradictory discourses in public debate about the effects of pornography on pent-up sexual energy. One school of thought suggests that pornography gets men sexually excited, to the point where they are likely to go out and commit rapes. This thesis was raised by one consumer, only to be denounced: 'the bloody Catholic Church … reckon, you watch some porno film then you'll go out and rape some girl... It's bullshit all that. Bullshit' (26; also 32).

The converse theory, also popular, sees pornography as a safety valve, allowing men to release sexual energy safely so they *don't* go out and commit rapes: as one

consumer put it 'Thing is, if you're not getting any, you ain't got a girlfriend, you've got some sort of sexual hang-up with buying a hooker, then you're gonna start exploding if you don't get something because guys are highly-sexed individuals … the problem if you're not getting any … for … five years or what have you, then you're gonna get fuckin' stir-crazy aren't you?' (40; also 19, 46).

However there was no simple celebration of this theory across all interviewees – only three out of 46 made this point. Another interviewee explicitly attacked this idea, saying it represented a simplistic view of human sexuality: 'I don't know if it's a valve to let off the pressure. Fine, what pressure? You know, it sounds like we're all a bunch of sexually frustrated people running around who are going to do stupid things if we don't get a root … Whereas I don't think that's the way it is' (4).

Interviewees suggested a wide range of possible effects of pornography on consumers. Some thought that pornography might lead consumers to see human sexuality in particular ways, but again, there was little agreement on this issue. The first point of disagreement was around how to describe the degree of effect that pornography might have. One consumer said that 'I don't know that it *shaped* my expectations … it may have *clarified* a little more' (36). Another concept used by interviewees was that pornography could create an 'expectation' with regard to sex (9, 31), or that it could 'reinforce' ideas (8), or 'contribute' to their circulation (6).

There was even less agreement on what ideas about sex are promoted by pornography. Some were slightly negative. One consumer suggested that pornography is phallocentric—that it places the penis at the centre of the sexual act: 'guys just think the cock is the focus, well intercourse is the focus…well not all women come that way, so, I wonder whether the porn industry has contributed to those ideas' (6). Another suggested that pornography might create the 'expectation' that 'men want sex all the time'—which she said wasn't true—in fact 'it's more the other way around [that women want sex all the time]' (9). A third suggested that pornography creates a misleading view of sex because it doesn't show how difficult, complicated, and messy the negotiations involved in the sex act actually are—it makes it look too easy: 'sometimes it gives me a false notion of people... my expectation and what other people want are two different things. People say no or piss off or something like that' (31).

Another female interviewee suggested that pornography correctly 'reinforce[s]' the idea that sex is 'just fun and silly' (8; also 34). This suggests a slightly different way of thinking about pornography's 'effects' – if those effects are positive, then they could better be described as 'education'. This word was used by several interviewees to describe the genre's effect on themselves (24, 30, 32, 34). As one argued: 'when you watch porn it teaches you how to have sex … you listen to what your man wants you to do and he listens to what you want him to do more often' (10; also 26); or: 'I guess it showed you different positions and also what women's bodies looked like' (24). The idea that pornography educates viewers by giving them ideas for new sexual positions and practices was a popular one among interviewees (25, 30, 31, 32, 44). Another consumer learned that some women can enjoy exhibitionist sex from pornography: 'I didn't realise a female would do this in public' (21). One interviewee pointed out that 'it's the only education some people get about sex' (34).

Related to this issue, other interviewees suggested that pornography, by showing them forms of sexuality that they could relate to but hadn't seen represented before, had the positive effect of reassuring them about their identity, and their right to practise their

own sexuality: 'you can find material for everyone, and you can find other people who are interested in the same sort of thing, and that helped a lot … I felt better about it … the kind of pornography that I'm interested in, that is portraying the kind of sex that I want to see, is available' (12; also 15). This was particularly true for non-normative sexual identities: one gay man used pornography as a

> re-affirmation of my sexual identity…you don't get in the mainstream media images of blokes sort of getting off except in *Queer as Folk* and so we—gay, poof, people—are largely invisible in terms of being sexual organisms and sexual identities outside that which is considered aberrant. So porn sort of gives you this erotic charge but also reaffirms you've got this sexual identity involved with another bloke—there's this sexual action you can do (29)

Other consumers made the point that it doesn't make sense to talk about the 'effect' that pornography has on ideas about sexuality without looking at the wider cultural context – on the effect that other media (and, as we shall see later, institutions such as church, family, and education) have on attitudes towards sexuality. One woman argued that 'I don't know about the porn so much … I think what is much more influential and much more pervasive is the movies and the television shows … I think that that whole thing where women are supposed to be passive, guys are the ones who are supposed to initiate things, guys are the ones who are supposed to ask you out, and the whole thing of if you're forward sexually then you're a slut … being an aggressive woman isn't a good thing [in film and television]' (9). Another woman similarly commented that when she was young she had an image of what it meant to be a woman that involved 'having to please all the time and having to perform right and sort of be whatever this image is and having big breasts whatever. But I don't know how much being exposed to a little bit of magazine porn was responsible for that, I think that was a lot more just in the role of being a girl and becoming a women and pleasing generally not just sexually … I mean whether it's barbies or romance novels or just general peer group issues, that compelled me more than porn' (41; also 34).

Another consumer suggested that the effect of pornography on users might simply be to give them pleasure – not necessarily to lead to any changes in practice in their everyday sex lives: 'it's an unreal situation most of the time, sometimes it's not fantasy material but it's unlikely ever to happen, put it that way… I have always seen it as something that is not real, and it is not how relationships work … I was always brought up to have respect for women, and, that 'no means no', and all that sort of stuff…. it is not the real world, put it that way' (19; also 20).

Perhaps the most idiosyncratic effect of pornography in our sample—underlining the idea that pornography does not have a single, homogenous effect on all consumers—was that one older gentlemen learned to read French as an effect of pornography: 'I got a copy of the *Kama Sutra*, it was in French and it was in the State Library … but I had no knowledge of French so I taught myself French and in three months I translated the book, that was why I learnt French in the first place, and subsequently I translated several other books from French into English' (36).

It has been noted in debates about media effects that people who worry about media violence and so on are usually worried that it will have an effect on *somebody else*—usually 'the masses'—but rarely on themselves (Gauntlett, 1998). We found this tendency with our interviewees. None of them felt they had experienced a negative

effect personally from consuming pornography, but some thought that pornography could have a negative effect on other people.

Some of the women interviewed who had no problem with the place of pornography in their own lives worried about the effects of pornography on men, imagining that it might 'stir up' men (1; also 8), or give them unrealistic expectations (19).

A few of the interviewees argued that only the mentally sick would make a connection between viewing pornography and going on to commit rape. One woman suggested that there might be a tiny number of 'perverts' who 'sit down and watch these movies and they decide that based on having watched that they're going to go out and do these terrible things' (13). Another noted that 'I don't believe that … normal healthy people are incited by what they see. Ah, there are always going to be, the odd people who don't quite fit in to what we consider normal who will perhaps be [incited]' (15). Another interviewee worried about people who are 'confused between the barriers of fantasy and reality' (32; also 5).

One interviewee worried about men for whom pornography was 'their only sexual expression'; these people, she worried, might 'view women as basically a sex object' (2). Similarly, one woman suggested that pornography could have a negative effect on men when they were virgins, but that 'you'd think once they'd had a bit of experience it wouldn't count anyway' (8).

Some consumers were worried about the use of pornography by those consumers who had addictive personalities: 'some people are compulsive about a whole range of things and I suppose pornography might be something that you could be addicted to like you can be addicted to other things' (2; also 3, 12, 39, 41, 42)

Another category of people who could be negatively affected by pornography were those with conservative views on gender roles: 'to people of a certain mindset, they think that woman's place is in kitchen and … also the woman is there to pleasure the man' (5).

In all these cases it is worth emphasising that the consumers are not drawing on case studies from their own experience. They are proposing the theoretical possibility that other people might be negatively affected by the pornography that has not had such a negative effect on them.

Addressing the issue of whether pornography should be banned so as to prevent it falling into the wrong hands, one woman noted that 'if they're going to do it, if they've got that in them, then they're going to do it anyway' (13), before going on to argue that 'point one per cent of people in the country … may respond to that, but the other 99.9 per cent of us have to deal with [the resulting censorship] …. just on the off chance that you know, someone may react badly to it' (13). Another woman claims that 'I don't believe that you can make rules because there are a few people who may well react in a certain way, when the vast majority don't' (15).

There were several other issues on which interviewees had much to say: in particular, the difference between beneficent and harmful pornography, the distinction between good and bad pornography, wider social debates about the genre, and the way in which censorship is managed in Australia. As noted above, these topics are discussed elsewhere (McKee, forthcoming).

Conclusion

Obviously the data given in this article should not be interpreted in the same way as a quantitative large scale survey (see McKee, 2003: 2-3). However, it does suggest that consumers of pornography, as much as any other citizens, are intellectually-aware and self-reflexive individuals who have something to contribute to public debates about the genre. In discussing pornography, they were not simply brainwashed cheerleaders for it. They were able to present often quite sophisticated thinking about the possible effects of pornography on its users. The highly differentiated accounts they offer suggest one way in which their expertise might contribute to our public debates – by moving us away from the idea that all pornography has a single 'effect' on all of its users.

In this, listening to the voices of consumers gives us quite a different perspective from that experimental academic research that attempts to find the effects of the genre by showing unrepresentative examples to non-consumers of pornography in stressful public settings. This can only improve our understanding of the genre, and provide valuable information for the ongoing public debates that seek to understand the place of pornography in our society, and its effects on those who choose to consume it.

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Appendix 1

Questions for the semi-structured interviews.

1. How did you find out about the survey?
2. Were you embarrassed to fill it in?
3. Look at survey answer about how much porn they use & quote it … do you think you use a lot of pornography?

   Look at survey answer as to whether partnered/single. Are you still single/in a relationship?

   If partnered … does your partner know that you use/use as much pornography?

   If they answer no … why do you feel like you should keep this from her/him?

   Do you use pornography together?
4. Do your friends know that you use pornography?

   If the answer is yes … do you exchange porn with them?

   Do you download/recommend movies for your friends?
5. Tell me about the first time you saw something pornographic … let them answer & if you don't have the information …

   Were you alone or with friends/girlfriend/boyfriend?

   How old do you think you were?

   Do you think that seeing porn at that age harmed you in any way?

Do you think that it shaped your expectations of what women want, or how they should behave sexually?

Do you think that it shaped your expectations about sex and love-making generally?

6. If a woman/man initiated watching/looking pornographic texts together would you be shocked?

   If yes, why?

7. Do you think that pornography is a problem in our society?

   If so why, and how?

   Do you think that it should be restricted?

8. What do you think about the way pornography is discussed in the media?
9. With regard to censorship, are you aware that it is illegal to sell (but not to buy) pornography outside of the ACT?

   Are you happy with that?

   Where do you buy yours?

   Do you think people should go to prison for selling porn, bearing in mind that it is illegal?

   It is also illegal to produce pornographic texts in this country … do you agree with that?

   Would you like to see more Australian pornography?

   If you had the choice, would you buy Australian or foreign-produced texts?

   Do you think that Australia should be allowed to produce its own movies?

   Why/not?

   Do you think the censorship system in Australia works well?

10. Is there anything that annoys you about the pornography that you buy?
11. What do you think makes for the best pornography?

Appendix 2:

Details of interviewees

Number	Age	Income (in $)	Education	Gender	Sexuality	Area	State	Religion
1	46-55	30,001-40,000	Tertiary	Female	Bisexual	Town	NSW	Methodist
2	26-35	40,001-60,000	Postgraduate	Female	Straight	City, urban	NSW	Other
3	36-45	Under 12,000	Still studying	Female	Bisexual	Small town	NSW	Anglican

4	36-45	60,001-80,000	Tertiary	Female	Bisexual	City, urban	NSW	Anglican
5	26-35	40,001-60,000	Secondary	Female	Straight	City, suburban	NSW	Atheist
6	26-35	40,001-60,000	Postgraduate	Female	Bisexual	City, suburban	Vic	Other Christian
7	36-45	40,001-60,000	Secondary	Female	Straight	City, suburban	Vic	Other
8	26-35	30,001-40,000	Tertiary	Female	Bisexual	Rural	Vic	Atheist
9	19-25	20,001-30,000	Still studying	Female	Straight	City, urban	Vic	Atheist
10	Under 18	12,001-20,000	Secondary	Female	Straight	Rural	Vic	Anglican
11	19-25	Under 12,000	Tertiary	Female	Straight	City, suburban	Qld	Other
12	19-25	30,001-40,000	Postgraduate	Female	Bisexual	City, urban	Qld	Atheist
13	36-45	Under 12,000	Tertiary	Female	BDSM	Town	Qld	Other
14	26-35	80,001-100,000	Tertiary	Female	Straight	City, urban	Qld	Atheist
15	46-55	20,001-30,000	Tertiary	Female	BDSM	City, suburban	WA	Atheist
16	36-45	20,001-30,000	Postgraduate	Female	Straight	City, suburban	WA	Atheist
17	26-35	Under 12,000	Tertiary	Female	Straight	Remote	Tas	Catholic
18	56-65	40,001-60,000	Secondary	Male	Gay/ Lesbian	City, urban	NSW	Atheist
19	36-45	40,001-60,000	Postgraduate	Male	Straight	City, urban	NSW	Atheist
20	19-25	30,001-40,000	Still studying	Male	BDSM	City, urban	NSW	Other
21	66+	20,001-30,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	NSW	Anglican
22	46-55	60,001-80,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	NSW	Catholic
23	Under 18	20,001-30,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	NSW	Other

24	19-25	Under 12,000	Still studying	Male	Straight	City, suburban	Vic	Atheist
25	19-25	12,001-20,000	Tertiary	Male	Bisexual	City, suburban	Vic	Anglican
26	66+	12,001-20,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	Vic	Atheist
27	26-35	12,001-20,000	Still studying	Male	Gay/ Lesbian	City, urban	Vic	Anglican
28	26-35	30,001-40,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	Vic	Anglican
29	46-55	60,001-80,000	Postgraduate	Male	Gay/ Lesbian	City, suburban	Qld	Atheist
30	66+	12,001-20,000	Postgraduate	Male	Gay/ Lesbian	City, suburban	Qld	Atheist
31	46-55	40,001-60,000	Secondary	Male	Gay/ Lesbian	City, suburban	Qld	Other
32	19-25	12,001-20,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	WA	No answer
33	56-65	20,001-30,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, urban	Tas	Other Christian
34	19-25	40,001-60,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	Tas	Catholic
35	26-35	30,001-40,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	Tas	Atheist
36	66+	12,001-20,000	Tertiary	Male	Bisexual	City, suburban	SA	Other
37	26-35	12,001-20,000	Still studying	Male	Celibate	City, suburban	SA	Atheist
38	26-35	40,001-60,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	ACT	Other
39	26-35	20,001-30,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	ACT	Other
40	36-45	80,001-100,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	NT	Other
41	26-35	12,001-20,000	Tertiary	Female	Straight	Rural	SA	Other
42	26-35	12,001-20,000	Tertiary	Male	Straight	Rural	SA	Other
43	36-45	60,001-80,000	Secondary	Female	Bisexual	City, suburban	Vic	Catholic

44	36-45	60,001-80,000	Secondary	Male	Straight	City, suburban	Vic	Catholic
45	36-45	20,001-30,000	Tertiary	Female	BDSM	Rural	Vic	Other
46	36-45	20,001-30,000	Tertiary	Male	BDSM	Rural	Vic	Other

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